

# Forum Stresses HIV Threat to Black Women

**Many are infected by men who have had sex with other men, activists say. Poor attendance at the event is seen as a sign of community denial.**

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Many in the African American community are alarmingly silent about the threat HIV poses to black women.

That was the message from black HIV experts and activists at an AIDS forum Saturday at King/Drew Magnet High School of Medicine & Science in Willowbrook.

Nearly seven in 10 women newly diagnosed with AIDS are black, even though they make up just 12% of the female population, panelists said.

"There's a lot of things in our community that we don't want to talk about," said Carla Bailey, a 50-year-old African American who is HIV-positive and sits on Los Angeles County's HIV commission. "It begins and ends with us."

The challenge was evident in the paltry turnout at the second annual event titled "The Cost and Casualties of Silence." Fewer than 75 people showed up — barely filling a quarter of the seats in the school auditorium.

"This is sad," said Tony Wafford, a one-time publicist for entertainers such as Miles Davis and Eddie Murphy who now works on HIV activism full time. "It's hard to come up and hear some truth."

There is still a misperception among some African Americans that HIV affects only gay white men, prostitutes and drug addicts, said Carrie Broadus, executive director of Women Alive, a South Los Angeles-based organization that provides support for HIV-positive women, predominantly those who are black and Latina.

"The women we serve, they're wives, they're professionals ... in what we call monogamous relationships, but they're getting infected" by their male partners, Broadus said.

In fact, these men often have sexual relationships with other men, or have come from prison, where such sex is not uncommon, Broadus and others said.

These men on the "downlow" become infected through unprotected sex and bring the virus home to their unwitting female partners, said former Assemblyman Roderick Wright.

Because African American men who have sex with men are often stigmatized within their community, Wright said, it's difficult to discuss the problem openly.

"If in the community we're going to stigmatize this, then they [black men] are not going to confront this,"

he said

Becoming infected is often a surprise for women who believe they are in monogamous relationships.

Indeed, when Bailey was nagged by her sister to get an HIV test 10 years ago, she was shocked at the results.

Not only was she HIV-positive, but she had full-blown AIDS and only 12 T-cells left in her body. A healthy person normally has at least 600 T-cells, which are a crucial part of the immune system.

"I wasn't doing drugs. I wasn't out running out with men," Bailey said. "I would have never guessed it in a million years."

In retrospect, she believes she was probably infected by her former fiance, a pilot who flew internationally and with whom she had a seven-year relationship. He was said to have died from cancer in 1992, but Bailey's sister thought the cause might have been AIDS and pushed Bailey to get tested.

More people need to acknowledge the risk — as well as advocate condom use and HIV testing — to partners, family members and community members, activists and experts said Saturday.

"A lot of folks are still being silent," said television actress Sheryl Lee Ralph. "God created human beings, and he hard-wired us to have sex.... They always said [AIDS] was a gay white man's disease. But it's a human disease.

"Disproportionately, it is about us," she said. "I am sorry to the point of tears that we refuse to hear it."

Overall, 47% of those living with HIV in the United States are black, the highest rate among any racial group, according to 2003 figures. AIDS was the leading cause of death for black women ages 24 to 34 in 2002.

Activists said it's important for more prominent black organizations, especially churches, to take a broader role in educating people about the epidemic.

"If we don't do something quickly, black women in this country will be in the same position white gay boys in San Francisco were [once] in," Wafford said.